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## NOTES AND COMMENTS.

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### I.

#### FOREIGN INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN FICTION.

AMERICAN genius has faltered in the paths of fiction, as if uncertain of its footing. From the first our writers have been inclined to break away from classical leading-strings, but the development of our national life has been confusing, making it almost impossible for any clear conception of the artistic values peculiar to our civilization to be had amid the babel of our conflicting tastes. Just now we are trying to be French; yesterday we were cultivating the Russians; last week the English had us under their thumbs. Daudet and Maupassant, despite Mr. Howells's eloquent plea for Tolstoi, are influencing (to a surprising degree) the currents of American fiction at this moment, while Scott and Thackeray and Dickens are powerless. It would be interesting and deeply instructive if all thinking Americans could see with absolute vision just how this Latin influence has reached the centres of taste in the United States. The art of painting has, of course, felt the current of control through direct channels, but the art of fiction has communicated with Paris through London. Say what we may to the contrary, we Americans have taken up, with but the slightest modifications, the critical strain indicated by the British key-note sounded from the great London journals. I said this recently, and was answered by a distinguished writer, who asserted that, in the case of Tolstoi, the Americans took up "Anna Karénina" and "War and Peace" long before the English had read them. I replied, with the facts all in my favor, that it was the people of our country, and not the critics, who took this lead; for the critical approval of Tolstoi's interminable, dreary, and oft-times disgusting novels came from Paris to London, and thence to America.

The Briton does not respond as readily as we do to the critical word of command. What we do we do at once and with all our might. Moreover, we are more susceptible to the influence of English authority than are the English themselves. The case of "Robert Elsmere" is in point. Mr. Gladstone's paper on that book made certain a tremendous sale for it on this side the seas. No American statesman could have made, by the same method, more than a ripple of interest for it. The Prince of Wales could create a furore throughout America for any work of fiction by adroitly lending himself to such an object as the suggestion implies. Under this lies a reason. We suspect at once that no mere vogue, no mere whim of popular taste, can account for a condition which has existed (with but slight variations) since the founding of our national independence, and we are warranted in looking for a strain running through the development of our local civilization—if I may use the phrase—a strain of education, tending directly toward engendering such a state of the public taste. Naturally the fiction that we read shapes in some degree the fiction that we write; but an alien art brings with it a touch of the foreign soil and a waft of the foreign air. The civilization of Great Britain is the opposite of a Republican civilization; that of France is even more pronounced in its attitude of antagonism to that crystal purity of democratic patriotism upon which, if upon anything, must forever depend the perpetuity of our national life. The political nihilism and the social gloom and pessimism of Russian fiction are said to be fairly representative of the trend of Russian national influence.

America, it would seem, can ill afford to have her children's characters formed in any large degree by direct alien forces; much less by those inimical to the fundamental principles of our moral, social, and political laws. "Art for art's sake" is the stumbling-block over which the self-conscious, faltering, note-taking genius is forever falling headlong, and when to this obstacle is added an always-present fear of offending foreign taste and attracting alien criticism, we have a thoroughly miserable artist, cutting and trimming desperately, with but faint prospect of ever doing anything really worthy the name of art. The reflex result of all this must be to create an exotic taste for fiction spiced with alien condiments. It has created such a taste. Year by year the book-stalls of America have been more and more overloaded with English novels of cheap workmanship (as regards both the literature and the printing) and of that peculiar cast of moral quality which comes of diluting French intrigue with English snobbery. In proportion to the increase of this tide of foreign fiction has been the decrease in the popularity of American fiction of the better class. At the same time it would appear that certain highly-gifted American authors, driven to desperation by their failure to succeed in the fair field of clean and high-toned work, have plunged into the apparently popular and probably remunerative current of a sensationalism almost bad enough to be called sensualism. The fact that a certain low grade of English novels and many poor translations of vicious French fiction do sell readily in our market has led American authors into believing that our public strenuously demands such products, when, in truth, the demand is largely the complement of a cheap supply. Doubtless there is in the sub-consciousness of the American people an ideal of fiction formed upon the essential peculiarities of our national life and imbued with the individual quality of our civilization; but this ideal is held in reserve by the force of alien influences which dominate our criticism and form the most potent element of our literary education.

A little observation and reflection will make plain to any understanding that the art of fiction has failed in America only in the novel, or at most in the fiction written with a special view to publication in book form. The short story, for instance, has been better developed in the United States than in any other country, with the exception of France, and just now I am not sure that even France has short story-writers superior to Aldrich, Cable, Edwards, Page, and Stockton—and I do not pretend to end the list here. Our great magazines have done excellent work in encouraging the short story by paying liberally for it; but where is the book of American short stories that has had the sale which has blessed Daudet's "*Lettres de Mon Moulin*"? A generous and general effort was made by reviewers, editors, correspondents, and everybody to urge Mr. Stockton's book of clever stories—"The Lady, or the Tiger?"—into a strong current of demand, but the result was not what the work really deserved, and the dreary "*Peace and War*" of Tolstol out-sold Mr. Stockton's bright and strikingly original work, simply because the Tolstol fad had behind it the force of alien indorsement. Mr. Howells was editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* for many years, during which time he wrote a goodly number of his very best works of fiction; but he took no leading place in the esteem of Americans until he chanced (by the merest accident) to attract attention in England through a little essay in the pages of the *Century* magazine. It was a personal and critical sketch of Henry James and his writings, and five or ten lines of it did the work which a dozen clever novels had failed to do. In fact, that little paper made a foreign standing for both Howells and James, in so far as public attention could do it. No sooner had the English journals deigned to consider what they took for extreme temerity in Mr. Howells's apparent sneer at Dickens and Thackeray, than the Americans began to echo back the cry, or to take up cudgels for the compatriot who had shown pluck enough to beard the British bull.

Still, neither Mr. Howells nor Mr. James, with their names rung up and down and back and forth, day in and day out, for years, in every city, town, hamlet, and neighborhood of our country, has ever been able to compare editions with Zola, Daudet, or many another alien novelist; and yet America is the book-reading nation of the world! In England a novelist of the standing of Mr. Howells can take the manuscript of his latest novel to his publisher and receive in exchange for it a check

for from ten hundred to fifteen hundred pounds. Even Anthony Trollope received as much as fifteen thousand dollars for a novel. It is safe to say that there is not in America a publisher (not a magazine- or journal-owner) who would pay Mr. Howells the half of such a sum. In a word, we present the curious condition of a nation reading more books than any other nation in the world, and at the same time paying to its own writers of high merit the smallest incomes offered to such authors within the limits of civilization. A leading element in the general cause of this state of things may be found in the American reverence for the cheap counter. Low-priced books flung out in heaps constitute the chief feature of our book-stalls, and in these heaps are found but very few American books. The native author is protected from home thieves. These stalls are bazaars for the sale of stolen wares, but the wares are necessarily all of foreign production. How is it possible for any high ideals to be generated in a country whose people are (intellectually) mere dependents upon foreign modes, vogues, and criterions of judgment? How shall we have a sane public vision and a sound public sense of morality so long as our bookstores are but whitened literary fence-dens? Mr. Lowell's sentence, "A book honestly come by is better than a cheap book," would look like humor if used as a sign over any publishing house in America, perhaps, and yet it is thought a matter of wonder that the art of fiction in this country is at a low ebb. A moral taint is more insinuating than any known essential substance. Dishonesty in one branch of the book-making business must affect the whole process from pen-nib to press and saleroom. On the other hand, there is no escape from popular corruption in literary taste, in social usage, in political purpose, and in moral quality, so long as bad books, alien books, books inimical to republican life and deadly to the social simplicity and moral purity of a democratic people, are read by our population in preference to American books.

In conclusion, I may say that the attitude of the American Congress toward this question of international copyright has been demoralizing in the extreme. It is to be hoped that Congress may soon atone for having said (by indirection) to the American people that it is morally right for us to steal and be stolen from, provided always that the subject of the theft is the property that an author has in the product of his literary labor; but no future Congress can ever quite undo the evil which has been wrought in the fibre of American life by the iteration and reiteration of such a doctrine.

MAURICE THOMPSON.

## II.

### AMERICAN AUGURIES.

IN THE winter of 1849 Sir Roderick Murchison received a boxful of minerals gathered in the foothills of the Australian Alps, and at once published a circular predicting the advent of a time when the bonanza sensation of upper California would repeat itself in the highlands of New South Wales. Sir Roderick himself had never visited that colony, and could not learn that gold had ever been discovered in southern Australia; but the resemblance of the minerals to those of the Ural and the Sierra Nevada sufficed to convince him that the precious metal must exist in large quantities. The subsequent discovery of placer-deposits rivalling those of the Sacramento Valley hardly astonished the geological prophet; he had felt sure that time would, sooner or later, confirm his prediction, because, as he expressed it in a letter to an Australian friend, "the analogy held good in all other particulars."

By a similar method of inference we might often anticipate the destiny of nations, even at the risk of awakening the anathemas of those metaphysicians who persist in considering man as an *alter ens*—a being governed by laws distinct from or even opposed to those of Nature in general. "For many years," says Herbert Spencer, "after men of science had become uniformitarians in geology, they remained catastrophists in biology; while recognizing none but natural agencies in the genesis of the earth's crust, they ascribed to supernatural agency the genesis of the organisms on its surface. Nay more, among those who are convinced that living